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# **Research Chronicler**

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**Editor-In-Chief**

**Prof. K. N. Shelke**

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**Existential Angst in the Novels of Arun Joshi****Dr. Anjan Kumar***Principal, G.R. Patil College, Dombivli (E), Dist. Thane, (M.S.) India***Abstract**

The novels of Arun Joshi depict modern man as hovering between despair and delusion. The characters in his novels tend to show the futility and hollowness of civilized society. The novelist seems to be driving home the idea that the modern civilized society is hollow, pretentious and snobbish. The hollowness, snobbishness, loneliness, deprivation and disintegration are the characteristics of what is known as existential angst. It is very essential that we understand the life in right perspective. Life of human being is very short and once a wrong path is undertaken, it becomes very difficult to change it. One has to pay the price for the wrongs done in life.

**Key Words** – anxiety, primitivism, rootlessness, agony

‘Angst’ is a German word meaning fear. It also denotes a general feeling of anxiety. It also implies a feeling of anxiety or apprehension, often without a specific or identifiable cause. The protagonists in the novels of Arun Joshi suffer from a feeling of loneliness, rootlessness, deprivation of love and disintegration. His novels depict modern man as hovering between despair and delusion. The characters in his novels tend to show the futility and hollowness of civilized society. They foster a longing to glorify primitivism. The five novels of Arun Joshi that shot him into prominence as a novelist are: *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) and *The City and the River* (1994). All the novels record the emotional turbulences and angst of the protagonists. The novelist seems to be driving home the idea that the modern civilized society is hollow, pretentious and snobbish. The hollowness, snobbishness, loneliness, deprivation and disintegration are the characteristics of what is known as

existential angst. Writing about the existential concerns as the major thematic concerns of Arun Joshi, Mr. Sudhin Bhoose writes,

“Multifarious thematic strands coalesce and merge into patterns in Arun Joshi’s five novels. Many of the concerns manifested by the protagonist of the novel find resonant echoes in the later ones. And certain motif-clusters strike hard and deep into the mind of the reader – the death dealing effect of an avid city civilization with its vacuous sophistication, where the life –giving spiritual fountain is gone dry. Existential groping for enduring meaning, along with kindred emotional turbulences such as agony, nausea, problems of freedom and choice, alienation from God, society and oneself, generalized corruption, failure of organized religion, the lopsided properties of the urban value system, all of which are elements common to

all the five novels with varying emphasis. "(Sudin Ghose, 1999: 18)

Arun Joshi, son of a botanist and eminent educationists, was born in Varanasi and educated in India and the U.S. He came back to India to pursue a career in the corporate world. *The Last Labyrinth* won him the Sahitya Akademi Award, India's highest literary honour. Shankar Kumar writes about the novels of Arun Joshi: "His novels take us to the heart of darkness- one of his most favourite metaphors is the Labyrinth -but he is not a prophet of despair. All his novels hold out promise of regeneration and redemption". (2003: 35)

The first novel of Arun Joshi is *The Foreigner* published in 1968. The title foreigner is probably derived from the status of mind of the protagonist and his constant shifting in living as well as in love relations. The remark of June, the girl friend of Sindhi Oberoi justifies how the title of the novel may be based upon the mental dispositions of the protagonist

"There is something strange about you, you know, somewhat distant I'd guess that when people are with you they don't feel like they are with human being ..... I have a feeling you would be a foreigner everywhere for this Sindhi justifies his predicament as such.

"My foreignness lay within me and I couldn't leave myself behind wherever I went". (*The Foreigner*, 1969: 52)

Sindhi Oberoi, the protagonist is born in Kenya of an Indian father and English mother. Soon after the death of his parents in a plane crash, he is brought to India by his

uncle. He is sent abroad for higher studies. He develops romantic relationship with two ladies named Anna and Kathy. But soon he finds himself disillusioned in love. Anna deserts him for another man. Kathy leaves him due to sacredness of marriage.

A frustrated man, Sindhi Oberoi goes to Boston where he falls in love with June where he meets June and proceeds to marry her. But at the eleventh hour he changes his mind and severs all relations with her. He gives an acceptable logic for denying marriage with her "One should be able to love without wanting to possess.... One should be able to detach oneself from the agent of one's love". For Oberoi marriage is painful. He cannot enter into marriage relationship with any one because the relationship brings with it a lot of pain and suffering. He wants to conquer pain. He says:

"I wanted the courage to live as I wanted; the courage to live without desire and attachment. I wanted the peace and perhaps a capacity to love. I wanted all these. But above all, I wanted to conquer pain". (*The Foreigner*: 63)

He believes in only temporary love relationship and not a permanent bond of marriage. He went to America simply for enjoying short-lived relationship in love - "What is the good of coming to America, if one is not to play around with girls?"(*The Foreigner*: 43)

Finally he dashes to Delhi where he meets Sheela and Khemka. Sheela is another lady who comes in the life of Sindhi. This love affair, too, does not fructify. He decides not



to marry her. But he is pained at the separation from June. The pain and agony are manifest when he is found reminiscing the time he spent with June,

“Here is where we met, here I bought a book, there she wanted me to kiss, and my heart would sink with the burden of my memories and I couldn’t help whispering to myself, my darling! Oh my darling. It can be very well observed that these are not the words of “One who should be able to detach from the object of one’s love” (The Foreigner: 60).

June marries a person called Babu and not Sindhi. But Sindhi continues with his relationship with June. Infidelity in marriage hurts Babu and he drinks and in an inebriated state he drives to death. June holds Sindhi guilty for the death of her husband. June, too dies during child birth. The tragic death of June bring to Sindhi a kind of realization - “ Detachment at that time had meant inaction. Now I had begun to see the fallacy in it. Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it. The gods had set a heavy price to teach me just that“(The Foreigner: 162)

Hari Mohan Prasad aptly points out regarding the journey of Sindhi: “ From Boston to Delhi has been a journey from alienation to arrival, from selfishness to sacrifice, from an anomic responsible to himself to a member of mankind, from being to becoming”(1985: 59). When Sheila asks how long he plans to stay with company, he replies:“I don’t know. As long as I’m needed, I suppose“(192). In this context Usha Pathania aptly remarks:

“ In his interpersonal relations, he ultimately succeeds in imbibing the rare and enviable quality of forgetting his separateness and individual identity. The journey from America to India has been a long journey indeed. He has reached his destination. The most coveted goal of peace within and around, emanating from a meaningful existence and a sense of belongingness has been attained. He is no more afraid of love, of freedom, of growth of change, of the unknown; he becomes himself“. (1992: 60)

Finally he is seen with Sheila and Khemka contemplating over the riddle of existence.

*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* was published in 1971. The hollowness and snobbishness of the modern civilized society provokes the protagonist to abandon the civilized life and seek refuge in the simple and primitive living of the tribes of Orissa. Biswas belonged to a high profile society by virtue of his father being a judge of the Supreme Court of India. His father wants him to acquire the best kind of education available. Biswas is sent to America for studying Engineering. But in America Biswas prefers to study Anthropology and specializes in the subject. On his return to Delhi he gets a job in Delhi University as a Lecturer in Anthropology. But the metropolitan life of Delhi does not suit his temperament. Biswas finds the life at Delhi quite unnatural, pretentious and hypocritical.

“What got me,” Billy confides, years after his transformation, “was the superficiality...I don’t think all city societies are as shallow as ours. I am,



of course, talking mainly of the so-called upper classes... I don't think I have ever met a more pompous, a more mixed-up lot of people."

"Well," answers the narrator, "you know why they are mixed up, don't you? Centuries of foreign rule, the period of transition, economic insecurity and so on."

"I can understand that," says Billy, "but for God's sake they have at least got to think about it. If they don't, the period of transition, as you call it, is going to last forever and ever." (SCBB: 60)

Billy is married to a Bengali girl named Meena Chatterjee. A child is born to the couple. But the Billy is a total misfit to run a family. He does not find the life at Delhi much different from the American materialistic Society. He finds happiness neither in family nor in teaching and the Delhi life. He decides to leave his wife and the small child and go to the deep forests of Maikal Hills. The novelist has chosen a sensational plot for the novel- "It is a 'sensational' plot; Joshi was habitually guilty of slight excesses in that regard. It is also exciting, wise, beautifully constructed, and one of the best English novels written anywhere in the world." (The Hindu, 2 March 2013, ed. N. Ravi)

Billy moves to the Maikal Hills near Bhuwaneshwar and confines himself in the tribal areas. He is compelled by a kind of primitive force to abandon the urban and civilized life "a great force, urkraft, a... a primitive force" (SCBB 18[1]). He falls in love with Bilasia, a tribal girl. The jungle and Bilasia become object of his new world.

"By becoming a tribal himself he comes to know that it is only in this world he can understand the ultimate motive of life" (Bhatnagar, 2000, p. 167)

*The Last Labyrinth* published in 1981 won Sahitya Academy Award for the novelist. Som Bhaskar, the protagonist, finally learns that the real joy of life can be found in money and mistress. Son of a prosperous industrialist, Som wants to surpass others in business. He has a lust for Anuradha, the mistress of another industrialist Aftab Rai. Som's wife Geeta fails to comfort his yearning for love and lust.

The conflicts present in the mind of Som is a reflection of conflict between two cultures which he has inherited from his parents. Born of a religious mother and scientist cum spiritual father, Som grows into a confused person. He does not actually know what he wants - "If only one knew what one wanted. Or, maybe, *to know* was what I wanted. To know. Just that. No more. No less. This, then, was a labyrinth, too, this going forward and backward and sideways of the mind" (*Last Labyrinth* 53). Critics are of the opinion that indecisive nature is inherent in human beings. S. Radhakrishnan says "in human nature itself there is a polarity, there is a dichotomy" (*Towards a New World* 141).

His lust for Anuradha reflects his unstable mental disposition. Joshi notices human existence in this bi-polarity:

"There are the wanters of this world and there are the givers. And, often, the wanters, I know, don't recognise the givers, or vice-versa. And most of the times, the wanters don't even know

that they are the wanters or the givers. And if they know, they are too shy to admit. Or, too proud. And so they wander on the streets of the world on opposite pavements, burning in their anger, to take or to give, and do not lift their gaze and, finally, fall in the dust of the road. So it goes". (34).

To conclude, the novels of Arun Joshi guide us to pursue a rightful path and live

purposefully in this world. It is very essential that we understand the life in right perspective. Life of human being is very short and once a wrong path is undertaken, it becomes very difficult to change it. One has to pay the price for the wrongs done in life. One is reminded of Osho here that fleeing from responsibility is not a solution to the problem. The real solution is awakening to what we have to do and where we are to go.

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